

# A *greener* land



Through their work with the *Sustainable Sites Initiative*, landscape contractors are supporting – and capitalizing on – Mother Nature.

BY **BETH GERACI** SENIOR EDITOR

**T**HE SUSTAINABLE Sites Initiative (SITES) Pilot Program has a certain obstacle course-like excitement to it. It's like the Amazing Race of the landscape world, without the race.

At a time when the landscape industry is increasingly turning to sustainable practices and LEED-certified buildings, the SITES Pilot Program is shedding new light on the importance of practicing ecological responsibility outside — on property.

The two-year pilot program launched in June 2010 and will end this June. Ultimately, it will lead to a new certification in the industry, one that will give the same panache to sustainable properties that LEED certification does to green buildings.

And for landscape maintenance contractors, SITES certification means much more than preserving the health of the ecosystem. It also can save you money, inspire your workers to be more resourceful, and strengthen your marketing power.

### How it works

At its core, SITES strives to inspire landscape professionals to be environmentally conscious, challenging them to use ecologically sound materials and methods that ultimately enable land to be more self-sustainable.

Spearheading the project are the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center, the American Society of Landscape Architects and the U.S. Botanic Garden.

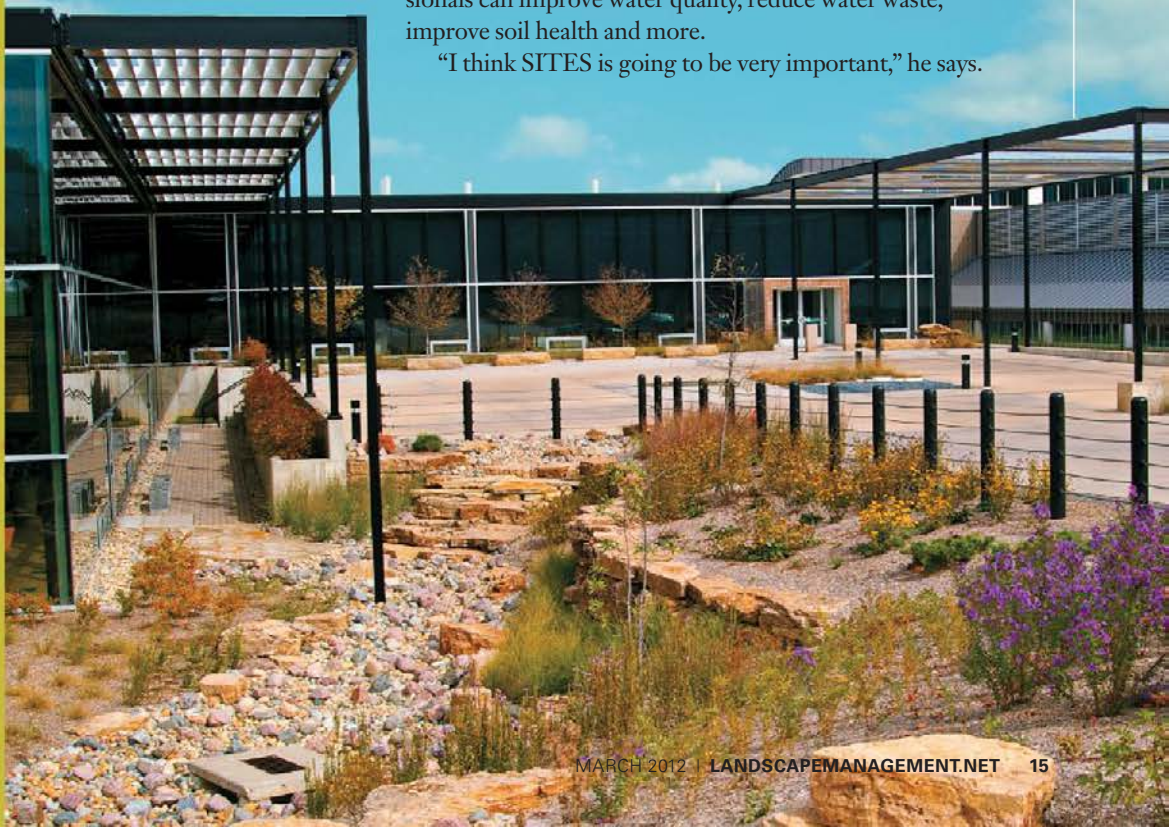
“Through the landscape decisions you make, you can bring back good things, like cleaner water, or sequestering carbon in the ground,” says the wildlife center’s executive director, Susan Rieff.

Stephen Cook recognizes that, too. A division account manager for Brickman Group, Cook sits on the SITES Materials Subcommittee, as well as the Sustainable Sites technical advisory group of the U.S. Green Building Council.

By improving the way ecosystems function, he says, landscape professionals can improve water quality, reduce water waste, improve soil health and more.

“I think SITES is going to be very important,” he says.

The Novus Campus is one of the three SITES pilot projects that have been awarded certification. The prominent area near the facility entrance had previously presented a problem for storm-water flow and drainage. Site enhancements created a rocky outcropping with native plantings and a combination of techniques for slowing runoff and improving water quality. The area has become home to native animals and insects.





As part of his SITES pilot project, Stephen Cook and his design team created this vegetated swale at Marriott headquarters to slow surface runoff and improve water quality.

***“We expect a lot of obstacles during the pilot project and embrace them because it will help the system become more robust in the end.”***

— STEPHEN COOK

It’s “riding on the momentum from the LEED rating system.... Really, to neglect the environment now will cost us greatly in the future.”

And, reducing a property’s environmental problems goes hand in hand with SITES’ second major goal — reducing costs.

“If you plant things that require lots of chemicals, lots of water, there are costs in that,” Rieff explains. “There are ways you can design the landscape that can contribute to saving money and preserving the environment.”

So whether it’s reducing the amount of drinking water used to irrigate, or transporting materials from sources near the work site to minimize fuel use, the SITES Pilot Program awards credits to participating teams who practice such methods successfully.

For a project to get stamped with certification, it must earn at least 100 credits on a 250-point scale.

It took a panel of experts in soils, hydrology, vegetation, human health and other areas more than four years to establish standards for SITES certification.

Through their efforts, they created national guidelines and performance benchmarks for sustainable land maintenance, construction and design practices.

The pilot program measures how effective those guidelines and benchmarks are once they’re put into practice.

“I do think there’s great importance for our industry,” DeSantis Landscapes President Dean DeSantis says of SITES. “It focuses on the areas where we can affect change. They’re creating essentially a guideline for landscape contractors, and if you’re not paying attention to that out here, you’re missing a lot of business opportunity.”

To be certified, the program requires projects to meet 15 prerequisites covering everything from site selection and allowed materials to soil restoration and sustainable construction practices (see sidebar, page 19).

More than 150 pilot projects across the country are in progress or have been completed. They were selected from among more than 300 applications based on size, project type and location. The process is so competitive that to date only three projects have received certification, on Jan. 25.

### **Volunteers who make it happen**

Propelling the projects are teams of professionals who volunteer their time, purchase their own materials, and if necessary, train their own crews.

DeSantis says the company’s previ-

ous work on several LEED projects prompted its interest in the SITES Pilot Program.

Whereas LEED focuses on the walls of a structure in, SITES focuses on property outside those walls, says DeSantis, whose project was a residence in Portland, OR.

“The owners said, ‘I don’t want to use any chemicals. I want this to be the greenest thing on the planet,’” DeSantis recalls. The project also entailed reuse of everything on the property.

Those things made the project a challenge for the DeSantis team — albeit a welcome one.

The DeSantis crew performed riparian enhancement on a creek on the property to promote fish health and converted a 7,500-square-foot weed field to a native and adaptive

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## COVER STORY

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plant garden. Before the garden was created, the field was sheet mulched to improve soil quality and water holding capacity.

Sheet mulching was new to the DeSantis team. It involved covering the entire backyard with cardboard. The cardboard attracts worms, which break down the cardboard over time. The team then topped the cardboard with six inches of straw and 12 inches of compost, which, like the cardboard, break down over time and create richer soil.

Ultimately, DeSantis says, “we revitalized and re-energized the natural ecosystem on the property.”

Ron Foil, president of RG Foil Landscapes Inc. in Santa Barbara, CA, also volunteered on a residential project. His work involved rain water harvesting, installing a green roof, native landscaping, and constructing four different types of irrigation systems. Foil



For this certified pilot project at the University of Texas, Arlington, a brownfield site was redesigned, turning a past drainage problem into an amenity.

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also installed a live roof on the property, which he first had to get certified for.

The property was small — only one-third of an acre. That posed the biggest challenge.

“How you handle odd spaces, there’s a certain method to doing that,” says Foil. “It was more time consuming than a typical project. The green roof

is probably 25 feet off the ground, so just getting the materials up there was an ordeal.... Everything takes longer than usual.”

The narrowness of the driveway also made things difficult. “It was a little tiny site with a tiny one-lane drive,” Foil says. “It was difficult to transport the

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## 15 PREREQUISITES FOR SITES CERTIFICATION

1. Limit development of soils designated as prime farmland, unique farmland and farmland of statewide importance
2. Protect floodplain functions
3. Preserve wetlands
4. Preserve threatened or endangered species and their habitats
5. Conduct a pre-design site assessment and explore opportunities for site sustainability
6. Use an integrated site development process
7. Reduce potable water use for landscape irrigation by 50% from established baseline
8. Control and manage known invasive plants found on site
9. Use appropriate, non-invasive plants
10. Create a soil management plan
11. Eliminate the use of wood from threatened tree species
12. Control and retain construction pollutants
13. Restore soils disturbed during construction
14. Plan for sustainable site maintenance
15. Provide for storage and collection of recyclables



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# LANDSCAPE CONTRACTOR INVOLVEMENT (BY STATE)

Landscape maintenance contractors have contributed to projects in **seven** of the 33 states (and D.C.) that are home to SITES pilot projects.



## PROJECT TYPES

25% park / 20% institutional/educational / 15% commercial / 3% residential  
8% transportation corridor/streetscape / 8% garden/arboretum  
6% government complex / 4% mixed-use / 1% industrial

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materials up the driveway. The logistics was mostly the problem more than any of the work was.”

Yet those obstacles made the project all the more enjoyable for Foil. “Everything was different from the ordinary,” he says. “That was fun because it’s not something you do on a regular basis.”

As for Cook, his pilot project at Marriott headquarters in Bethesda, MD aimed to improve soil health and reduce use of drinking water for irrigation, among other things.

Going into the pilot project “I hoped we could achieve certification but knew it would be difficult,” says Cook, whose project did not meet SITES stormwater quantity and quality measures.

“We expect a lot of obstacles during the pilot project and embrace them because it will help the system become more robust in the end,” he says.

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Cook felt his Marriott project was a valuable learning tool that will provide helpful data for SITES certification going forward.

“I feel like we’re learning...and will apply this knowledge and understanding of the rating system to our projects in the future,” he says. “We hope our customers see we are not only serving our contractual obligations, but our obligations as caretakers of the ecosystem.”

Getting a SITES project certified is no easy task. In addition to having to pay for their own materials, assemble their own crews and meet the 15 prerequisites, volunteers also are required to document their work in detail. If they don’t, volunteers have to go back and cover their tracks.

But “if you weren’t going to make it, you wouldn’t just get a negative in the

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## PROJECT PROGRESSION

**The DeSantis Landscapes team was charged with turning this 7,500-square-foot weed field into a native and adaptive plant garden.**

1. The team sheet mulched the weed field as a means of improving soil quality and water holding capacity.
2. The project also entailed tearing down this garage.
3. The team then used the garage foundation as part of the native plant garden. To the right of the garden runs a stream, which the DeSantis team did riparian enhancement on to ensure the health of fish.
4. The garden is beautified by colorful rocks and stones, and a pathway through the property highlights improved soil quality.

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mail,” says Holly Shimizu, executive director of the U.S. Botanic Garden. “We would let you know early on so you don’t have to go through all that effort and then get rejected.”

Certified or not, Rieff says, “by doing the pilot projects they are helping us revise the system down the road.”

That’s because participants share with the SITES staff their feedback about obstacles they encounter along the way. That feedback will be used to adjust the final SITES certification requirements when they are officially released in spring-summer 2013.

### The value of SITES in marketing

DeSantis sees his company’s SITES experience as a valuable marketing tool, “definitely.” It doesn’t advertise it on its business cards, but staff members mention it in client meetings.

“We’ve got more like white paper type of things we’ll slide across the table and say, ‘Here’s an example of a site where we swapped out all the irrigation nozzles, here’s what their payback was.’ We show the numbers. When it really comes down to it, people are concerned with how much it costs and what’s the return on the investment.”

Cook says he does not advertise his sustainable activities as much as he should. But when customers ask about his sustain-



The cascading water at the Novus Campus passes below a pedestrian footbridge and into aquatic habitat. The cascade helps improve water quality through circulation and filtration and provides an aesthetically pleasing amenity for employees and visitors.

able efforts, he is quick to tell of his SITES involvement.

“Our participation in the project has proven very beneficial,” he says. “It gives us an edge when we’re competing.”

Phil Loughman, president of L.I.D. Landscapes in Boulder, CO, was looking forward to retrofitting a residence in the area as part of the pilot program, largely so he could

trumpet his involvement in the program in his marketing. But due to the tanking economy, the property’s owners decided to hold off on the project.

“We thought it was good business,” Loughman says. “This sort of thing is right up Boulder’s alley.... We’re a bit disappointed that the project didn’t go further.”

### What’s next

When the pilot program ends in June, SITES subcommittees will assess credit achievement history and participants’ comments, all of which will be used to revise the SITES final version.

Ultimately, feedback from teams working on the pilot projects will be used to create an official reference guide for professionals interested in sustainable land practices.

The U.S. Green Building Council, a stakeholder in the initiative, also plans to incorporate the SITES guidelines and benchmarks into the LEED Green Building Rating System.

When the pilot program ends, says Nancy Sommerville, chief executive officer of ASLA, the SITES staff will adjust the rating system based on insights gleaned from the pilot program. Then there’ll be another public comment period (already there have been two) before a final version is published and open enrollment begins.

“We think we’re offering up some good practices and performance benchmarks,” Rieff says. “We hope people will want to step up to the plate and use them.” **LMM**

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